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Crossroads of Mind and Heart: Incorporating Intellectual Tenacity into an Information Literacy Program



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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the incorporation of the concept of “intellectual tenacity” into an information literacy component of several theology courses at a Christian university. The librarian collaborated with four different Theology Department professors to design a successful research experience for the students, centered on the research assignment in each course. First, research skills were taught by the librarian, then preliminary bibliography assessment was done by the professors, and finally, students followed through on recommendations for intellectually tenacious research and completed their assignments.

Introduction

As all academic librarians know, university professors are in the habit of assigning research papers to students. Students are expected to carry out the research and write the papers. Some students will make their way to the university library to ask for help with their research, and this is the point at which librarians usually meet up with them. The following is a scenario that probably sounds familiar to many librarians; it's a scenario I encounter almost daily. A student comes to the Reference Desk for help with a research paper. The student tells me that his/her professor requires, for example, two books and three scholarly articles in order to write this research paper. I patiently and expertly teach and guide the student in using the library catalog and searching the periodical indexes. Five or ten minutes pass, and in my mind, we have just begun to sort out the assignment and find a few possible resources. But the next thing I know, the student has grabbed the first two books and three articles and dashed out the door! It seems the student has gotten what the professor requires, and that's all he or she cares about. I want to call after the student, “What about the second screen of results? And the third...?”

Intellectual Tenacity

For some time I have wondered what it would take to convince a student that more time should be spent on finding the best sources to write the best possible

paper. I know that part of the answer comes through good information literacy instruction, so students can learn successful research techniques. But it wasn't until I attended a campus workshop in the summer of 2013 on the topic of the "intellectual virtues" that a lightbulb came on for me. One of the virtues we discussed in the workshop was that of "intellectual tenacity." In the third chapter of his book *Virtuous Minds: Intellectual Character Development*, Philip Dow (2013) covers the concept of intellectual tenacity, which he declares to be a virtue worth cultivating. When using this phrase, Dow is speaking against a "culture of cutting corners," and in favor of a culture of "real achievement" – one that is needed "in order to grow beyond our current limitations" (pp. 41-42). When one is intellectually tenacious, one "forces oneself to learn how to think well," says Dow, and he likens this to an artist who battles through the process of understanding physics and biology in order to improve the depth of his or her art (pp. 42-43).

After reading Dow, I had the answer to my question! The concept of intellectual tenacity is a great fit for the Christian university at which I am a librarian. At my university, we talk about an "education of the mind and of the heart." This concept is even part of our mission statement. Many Christian colleges and universities have a similar sentiment expressed in their mission statements, such as "...integration of exemplary academics and spiritual formation" at one Colorado university, and "...distinguished by intellectual maturity and Christian character" at a college in Massachusetts. We may not often think about the fact that, while universities everywhere have a mission to educate the mind, educating the heart is fairly unique to Christian institutions. Educating the heart comes back around to teaching virtue, which Aristotle tells us leads to excellent character through excellent habits of action. And besides the fact that intellectual tenacity is a virtue, there is ample scriptural encouragement for the concept of tenacity itself. Paul in Philippians 3:13-15 says, "Straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me.... All of us who are mature should take such a view of things." Hebrews 12:1 provides this mandate: "Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us." And in 1 Corinthians 9:24 we read, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize."

So, with the university mission and the Word of God supporting me, I was ready to take up the challenge of helping students develop excellent, intellectually tenacious research habits. I knew I couldn't do this single-handedly, so I entered into a collaborative project with four faculty members in the university's Theology Department. We called the project "Crossroads of Mind and Heart." This article will describe the semester-long project, for which I incorporated a discussion of intellectual tenacity into my information literacy sessions, along with instruction in the "tricks and tips" of successful theological research. I worked closely with

the Theology faculty members as we introduced these ideas to students, tested our hypotheses, and assessed the outcomes. This article will also show why, at the semester's end, I was so gratified to hear one of the professors make the following statement, which was the general feeling of all four: "Combining this practical instruction with the inspiration to be intellectually tenacious in their pursuit of knowledge yielded encouraging results in the students' papers this term!"

The Project Begins

I define intellectually tenacious research as research that persists in searching for and finding the best and most effective sources of information to answer an information need. Whether one needs to know the show time of a movie on Saturday night, or the newest development in cancer treatment, one carries out this research until the most accurately informed answer is obtained. University students have information needs like everyone else, and some of these come in the form of sources needed to complete a research assignment and get a good grade on it. Therefore, the question asked and answered by this project is: "How can the virtue of intellectual tenacity be instilled in theology students as they conduct research?"

Colleagues have asked how I was able to secure faculty members to participate in this project, since it would require a mutually-conceived research assignment, a class session given over to instruction, and extra time spent by the professor in assessing students' sources. At the start, I set about to make the time spent worthwhile, and wrote and received a grant from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion to provide stipends to Theology Department faculty members. With the offer of a \$500 stipend to each of four professors, the collaborative project was on its way. I knew that working with classroom faculty would become key to the success of this project, and comments such as the following bore this out:

- "Having just started teaching here, I had assumed far too much of my students in terms of their basic familiarity with the resources available to them in the library."
- "I often receive very weak final papers, sometimes full of unlikely and unhelpful ideas gleaned from internet sites or popular books."

The Project Unfolds

I have found over the years that librarian-faculty collaboration is as rewarding as it is necessary when designing a project that promotes a successful research experience for students. The individual expertise of each party is brought to the table in order to form something greater than the whole. The librarian brings expertise in the knowledge of resources and information literacy instruction methods, and the faculty member brings subject expertise and a method for assessing the strengths of the sources located by students. While I taught students how to successfully conduct

their research, my faculty colleagues assessed the quality and content of the research results. Together we were able to design assignments and pedagogy that promoted intellectual tenacity. Below is the project timeline as it appeared in my grant proposal, and as it unfolded.

WHEN	WHAT	WHO
January 2014	Recruit four Theology Department faculty members to participate in project	Librarian
January 2014	Hold individual meetings to design assignments and develop process for evaluating sources	Librarian and each faculty member
February 2014	Teach instruction sessions	Librarian, faculty member, and students
March-May 2014	Conduct individual research	Each student, and librarian as needed
March-May 2014	Carry out resource evaluation process	Faculty member and students
May 2014	Assess assignment outcomes and quality of resources	Librarian and each faculty member separately
May 2014	Pay stipends to faculty members	Librarian
May 2014	Assess entire project and write final grant report to Wabash Center	Librarian
June 2014	Prepare and present ACL conference presentation showcasing project results	Librarian

Course Assignments

My first collaboration was with a 300-level course, “History of Christianity: Renewal Movements,” for which the professor planned to assign a 12-page research paper about a Christian movement or figure. For the next collaborative meeting, I worked with a professor who was assigning a seven-page biblical exegesis paper to his 300-level Old Testament class. The topic for that paper was “tensions in the Old Testament,” and students would choose any tension found between two different Old Testament books, explore the theme as it was debated between the two different texts, and set the tension in its historical, literary, and theological contexts. Six sources were to be used: two commentaries, a scholarly article found through ATLA, the Anchor Bible Dictionary, and at least one book.

The professor of a 200-level course on the Book of Revelation met with me to design a six-page exegesis paper on a chosen or assigned passage from Revelation. The professor placed 20 commentaries on reserve in the library, from which students would choose three. They would also locate one article and one other authoritative source of their own choosing (I planned to promote specialized encyclopedias in my

instruction session.) For the first time, this professor would also require an annotated bibliography that included several other sources, from which students would choose the best ones. Finally, my last collaborative meeting was with the professor who taught a 100-level course entitled “A Biblical Introduction to God,” and planned to have students prepare an exegetical paper on a biblical passage of their choice, illustrating their thesis by means of a piece of classical or modern artwork.

Lesson Plans

At the beginning of the semester, I visited each of the four classes, and spent about 10 minutes discussing the concept of intellectual tenacity using the following active learning method. When introducing the concept to students in these short sessions, I first asked the question, “What is one thing you are good at?” After several students provided answers such as “gymnastics” or “playing the piano,” my next question was, “How have you exhibited tenacity to become good at this?” Answers like “practice” and “long hours” and “trying to become better” filled the air. Students were fairly quick to connect the idea of persisting at something of value as a conduit to becoming good at it, along with the desirability of doing this. We ended the discussion by pondering the question, “What would it look like to be *intellectually* tenacious?”

Next I developed a course-specific research guide for each class, using Springshare’s LibGuides software, and featuring tools and resources suggested by both the faculty member and myself. Each professor linked the LibGuide to the course Blackboard page, and arranged a time for me to meet with the class for an instruction session within the next several weeks. Depending on the needs and wishes of the professor, these sessions ranged in length from 20 minutes to two hours, and included the basic elements of information literacy instruction. In addition, I provided each class with a tailored demonstration of “tricks and tips” for using key resources presented on the course-specific LibGuide. In three of the four sessions, this was augmented with a period of hands-on work by students overseen by the professor and myself, and in one case, the entire class returned for a one-hour session in a computer lab at a later date.

Session takeaways for each student included such things as a specialized encyclopedia article, a scholarly journal article located through the ATLA Religion database, and/or a piece of artwork found using ARTStor. Each professor gave students the assignment of producing an intermediate, annotated bibliography, and finally, I encouraged students to contact the library for any further assistance. At this point, my direct involvement with classes was finished. Each professor had devised a method of assessing the sources on students’ intermediate bibliographies, and on several occasions, I was pleased to see students coming back to the library to follow up on these assessments and locate “better” sources.

Evaluative Methods

At mid-semester, the professors assessed their students' bibliographies, looking at the quality of sources listed. The various assessment methods are evident in the following comments. One professor stated, "I challenged students to be tenacious in their search for reliable and useful sources, and to take the time to assess and review them before citing them in their papers." Another explained, "After reviewing the submissions, I met one-on-one with each student, and in almost every case, suggested additional sources, or encouraged more variety in the type of sources they should consider." A third reported, "Though I was pleased to see nearly every student include the required amount (six) and type of resources (two commentaries on each text, a journal article, and one additional source of any type), few had yet demonstrated their intellectual tenacity by surpassing that minimum." This mid-semester evaluation was essential to the process of encouraging intellectual tenacity in the students and their ongoing research.

Each professor gave varying degrees of follow-up assistance to students, yet each counted this intermediate step in the intellectual tenacity spectrum to be well worth the effort. Here are several more comments to indicate this fact:

- "the range of sources students accessed was broader"
- "students may well find many sources that are not in the end worth using for their papers"
- "transparent to a process of discovery"
- "choosing one of the higher-quality commentaries to which we pointed them"
- "utilizing material in more compelling ways"
- "not just choosing quotations that validate what they already understand about a text"
- "learn how to assess critically the things they look up online"

Tenacious Results

At the end of the project, each faculty member reported extensively on the intellectually tenacious results of our collaboration. In most cases, the students responded to our efforts by including new and better-quality sources in their final papers and bibliographies. One professor remarked, "I was able to appeal to the concept of intellectual tenacity to motivate them to do more for the final version of their papers." A second told his class, "An 'A' is a recognition of excellence, and excellent research will not be content with the minimum number of sources, but will track down knowledge in as many sources as it takes to find it." A third quipped, "This term's projects were stronger!" And to my satisfaction, all four echoed this sentiment: "Thanks to the instruction you provided, they also referenced better sources!"

Assessment Examples

As already indicated, much of the assessment piece of the project was carried out by my classroom faculty colleagues. This area of expertise is subject-specific, and I left it up to them to determine criteria by which they would assess the students' bibliographies and final papers. One professor even carried out a statistical analysis to compare sources used in papers from a previous semester, and papers from the semester of our joint project. His analysis showed that more "credible" sources were used as a result of this project, as well as fewer "non-credible" online sources; these two areas had been a personal goal of his.

Semester	Number of Sources	Number of Online Sources
Fall 2013 (no project)	Total = 199 Average = 7.12 per paper	Total = 14 Average = 0.5 per paper
Spring 2014 (intellectual tenacity project)	Total = 290 Average = 11.15 per paper	Total = 6 Average = 0.23 per paper

Each faculty member also sent samples of students' work as illustrations of improvement. The professor of the Revelation course reported, "The final essays were much better-informed, more cognizant of the range of possible readings of their assigned text, more nuanced in their arguments, and less likely to have missed critically important literary or historical data." For example, here is what one Revelation class member included in her annotated bibliography:

- H.A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Book of Revelation* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1971)
 - ...I do intend on using this source as much as possible due to its refreshingly unique perspective on Revelation which is aligned with what I believe is the actual purpose of the epistle.
- Peter Wick, "There was Silence in Heaven (Revelation 8:1): An Annotation to Israel Knohls 'Between Voice and Silence,'" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117, no. 3, (1998): 512-14.
 - ...this article delves too deeply into this topic to feature prominently in my paper.
- "Pt. 38-Silence in Heaven," *Answers in the End Times*, accessed March 31, 2014, <http://www.answersintheendtimes.com/index.php/The-Revelation/Pt-38-Silence-in-Heaven>
 - ...I will not use this article as it lacks any trustworthy credentials!

Final Analysis

In the final analysis, the “Crossroads of Mind and Heart” project was a resounding success. Feedback from the four faculty collaborators, plus evidence of improved student output, demonstrated this fact. Both qualitative and quantitative evidence was provided by the professors, yet equal satisfaction was felt through the intangible benefits of intellectual tenacity. Seeing a student smile after having a successful research experience, or upon receiving an “A” on a paper, was worth its weight in gold. The successful partnerships forged with faculty members as a result of this project will assure that more students benefit from learning about intellectually tenacious research. I know that when a professor uses the phrase “in the future” in evaluating our work together, there is an intention to collaborate again. This particular comment reads in full: “In the future, I think it will be important to require students to directly compare two commentaries and argue in their papers for the one which is more persuasive. This would ensure that students have at least one opportunity to practice intellectual tenacity.”

Last but not least, a personal accolade is always welcome, and this faculty comment serves to provide one:

It has been a privilege to collaborate with the librarian on the Intellectual Tenacity project this semester. The academic virtue of tenacity is not an easy one to teach, but she enabled me to introduce the idea by helping me design an annotated bibliography assignment that I linked to an existing paper assignment in my course and by giving a presentation to my students.

The comment ends with:

I suspect that often in the past my students have simply decided to use whatever they first find in the library or online and have not been tenacious enough to keep searching until they find genuinely useful and relevant sources. †

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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